

Membership in Christ Covenant Church

Welcome to Christ Covenant Church! We are delighted to share in the worship of God and the communion of saints with you. We trust that your time with us proves to be edifying and enjoyable, that you will be encouraged and strengthened in your walk with God, and enfolded into the welcome of a loving church community.

Whether you are seriously considering membership at Christ Covenant Church, or just curious, we think it will be helpful to lay out our understanding and practice of church membership.

Church Membership in Scripture

In Scripture, *the Church* is not simply a term to describe unconnected individuals who happen to believe in Jesus. The Church is visible, and on a local level, churches are ordered societies with members who are committed to one another.

It is true that we do not find the term *membership* itself in the Bible. But we do find the term *members*, to refer to body members who are connected to one another (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12.12-27). Christ is the Head of the Church, and the believers are His body. As with the human body, there is connection between the foot and the head precisely because the foot is part of the body; the believer's connection to Christ is not simply an individual matter, but comes in the context of the visible body of Christ.

The *ordered* nature of the Church is reflected in the command of Hebrews 13.17a: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account."

We see from this verse that, although there is no biblical evidence that membership was formalized by way of signing a piece of paper, nonetheless, the Church was identifiable, visible, and had an authority structure. There were identifiable leaders who exercised authority that was to be submitted to, and who were to answer for the souls of their flock; conversely, there were identifiable people for whom they were responsible.

Because many North American people professing Christianity - and indeed some churches - have failed to recognize the necessity of the visible Church, things have become somewhat more complicated than in the first century. (The advent of numerous denominations adds yet another complicating wrinkle.) In the first century, it was simply presupposed that anyone baptized and living in a certain place was a member of the church of that place, and subject to its leadership. The notion common to modernity, that one could simply be a member of "the invisible Church," was unthinkable.

Principles of Membership

Given these issues, we at Christ Covenant Church believe it is valuable to formulate how we are attempting to make our own practice one that is both faithful to Scripture and viable in the modern North American context. This practice is based upon the following principles:

1. The Church is not an optional part of Christian life, but the place where Christ's life is made personally active in the world, as the Church is Christ's body.

2. This Church is visible. Locally, churches are ordered communities bound together by Christ and His Word by the Spirit.
3. The Christian is always to be connected with a recognizable local church to which he or she is accountable and bound in love.
4. We do not believe that we as a congregation are the sole genuine local church of Christ.
5. We believe that churches need to manifest the unity of the broader church by increasingly learning how to honour each other's discipline and oversight.
6. The Lord's Supper is for the whole body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10.17), which is defined by Christian baptism (Acts 2.41).

Practice of Membership Inclusion

The constitution of Christ Covenant Church of Grande Prairie officially distinguishes between two types of membership: that of "confessing" members and that of "communicant" members (Article 2).

Confessing members: (1) are at least 18 years old; (2) have appeared before an elder; (3) have expressed agreement to abide by the constitution; and (4) have committed themselves to full participation in the life of Christ Covenant Church. Confessing members "have the right to vote on all matters presented by the eldership for vote at any congregational meeting."

Communicant members are (1) baptized children of confessing or communicant members; *or* (2) those who wish to participate in the life of Christ Covenant Church but have not formally affirmed their agreement with the constitution. They are free to express their views to the leadership, but do not have the right to vote at congregational meetings.

Confessing membership is relatively straightforward. Since we do want adult members to participate in the voting decisions of Christ Covenant Church, we encourage them to become confessing members as soon as they can do so in good conscience.

The case of children of confessing members is also quite straightforward. As long as they are baptized, they will be admitted to the Lord's Supper, as they are visibly and formally part of the body in baptism, according to the principle that the whole body partakes of the one bread (1 Corinthians 10.17).

What is to be done, however, with adults who attend Christ Covenant Church but have not yet become confessing members?

Since we believe that (1) all believers must be connected to a particular local church; and (2) all the baptized are to participate in the Lord's Supper, over the course of our experience we have determined that the most reasonable and faithful course of action for us is to treat regular attendees as *de facto* communicant members.

This reflects the provision in our constitution for "those who wish to participate in the life of Christ Covenant Church but have not formally affirmed their agreement with the constitution" to

be communicant members. To be specific, any decision you make to become a regular attender here will be taken by us as a “wish to participate in the life of Christ Covenant Church.”

Given the principle that churches need to learn better to honour one another’s discipline and oversight, Christ Covenant Church endeavours to be in contact with your former church if you are transferring from elsewhere. This will help us to disciple you, as well as express the unity of Christ’s church.

What Membership Means for You and Us

Membership means that *you belong*. The membership language itself derives from the body imagery of the New Testament, such as 1 Corinthians 12. The members of the body belong to the body and belong to Christ, and the members serve one another for mutual benefit. This means that the broader body is called upon to love you and care for you, and you in turn are to love your brothers and sisters.

Membership means that *you are served* through the ministry of the Word and prayer. The leadership of Christ’s Church is instructed to shepherd the flock of God (e.g. 1 Peter 5.2) by way of teaching, instruction, and prayer. You in turn are called upon to remember them and hear the Word faithfully as it is administered to you (cf Hebrews 13.7).

Membership means that *you have oversight*. Church leaders keep watch over your soul as those who will have to give an account. This means that you are called upon to submit to their counsel (Hebrews 13.17).

What If I Don’t Believe the Same Way?

Beyond belief in the basic creeds (e.g. Nicene) which uphold such matters as the deity of Christ and the Trinity, Christ Covenant Church does not require members to uphold our extended doctrinal standards (although eligibility for the office of elder or deacon does require fuller likemindedness). Although we do believe that doctrine is important, and our understanding of Scripture is bound to be taught and preached, we also believe that the Christian faith is broader than a narrow doctrinal tradition, and we welcome those who hold to the creeds but are not persuaded of various other teachings we uphold.

What If I No Longer Want Membership in Christ Covenant Church?

Understandably, we never want anyone to leave our congregation. Yet realistically, various circumstances will dictate that such can happen at times.

Because Christ Covenant’s leadership is (1) committed to being obedient to Scripture in what we do; and (2) called upon to watch over the souls of our members, we are not simply at liberty to act with indifference to requests for withdrawal.

In Scripture, one left the authority of one local church when he or she came under the authority of another local church. This is based on the principle that the believer is always part of a visible church, and not simply under his own authority. In our present context, the presence of multiple local churches means that one may come under the authority of another local church even if one has not moved.

This recognition means that, so long as you are not under formal discipline at the time, Christ Covenant Church is willing to facilitate transfer of your church membership to another body if you believe you would be more at home there doctrinally or for other reasons.

We will not, however, simply dissolve your membership and leave you without a church home, as such dissolution is not a biblical option. As those charged to watch out for your soul, we cannot release you into such a fundamentally unbiblical situation.

Finally, there is another form of departure from the local church, but it is not a desirable one. In the case of hardened rebellion against Christ and His Church, a member may be excommunicated. Paul mandates this in the case of the man who committed adultery with his father's wife (1 Corinthians 5), and Jesus commands that those who wrong their brothers and refuse to repent in the face of godly counsel from the church, shall be treated as outsiders to the faith (Matthew 18.15-20). Such discipline is both for the sake of the purity of the church (removal of corrupting leaven, 1 Corinthians 5.6-8) as well as the hope of future repentance (1 Corinthians 5.5). In such circumstances, formal discipline is not enjoyable, but is a solemn duty mandated by God Himself.

Conclusion

It is our privilege and joy to share the covenant life which God has granted to His people in Christ. We look forward to living in community with you in Christ's love, sharing our lives together with you, and serving you through the ministry of God's Word. We trust that you will always feel welcome in Christ Covenant Church.